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ABSTRACT

Investigating the common perception that collaborative writing in composition classes is being used primarily with finished products, an informal survey was conducted in which writing instructors who used collaborative learning estimated the amount of time they allowed for each stage of the writing process (Prewriting/Invention, Focusing/Thesis, Writing, Revision, Editing, and Proofreading). Subjects were 71 composition instructors, including faculty from Western Illinois University as well as other secondary and university instructors. The results showed that for teachers using collaborative learning: (1) collaboration for prewriting is being used most by college teachers (81%) and revision most by secondary teachers (89%); (2) collaboration is used least by both groups at the writing or drafting stage (49% college and 54% secondary); (3) secondary teachers use collaboration at more stages of the writing process than do university instructors; and (4) secondary teachers exert more control over grouping of their students. (A table of data is included.) (ARH)

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# Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Composition: Theory and Practice

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In 1980 Richard Gebhardt urged composition teachers to broaden "the range of problems upon which collaborative writing works...since this can help de-isolate students and give them moral support, as well as bring them wider points of view, throughout the writing process" ("Teamwork and Feedback:Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing," College English 42[September, 1980]: 74). He assumed that most collaborative work was being done at the peer revision and editing stages of the writing process. However, knowing that my classes were making use of collaborative strategies throughout the writing process, I wondered whether my colleagues were, too. Those messy classrooms that I entered with desks left in jumbled clusters were an outward sign that the structure of many of our classes had changed. How many of us had already incorporated collaborative teaching strategies throughout the writing process? To answer this question, I began to survey teachers of composition, starting with my colleagues at Western Illinois University and continuing with the teachers attending workshops I presented in the following year.

Gebhardt considered feedback to be "the base of collaborative writing" because it allows other theories such as "the rhetorical

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sense of audience, the psychological power of peer influence, [and] the transfer-of-learning principle" to work (69). This paper is titled Theory and Practice, and in beginning with the theory I wish I could say, "Here is the accepted cannon of theoretical writings about the use of collaborative learning in the composition classroom. All of the teachers I have surveyed have read these theories, and that is how and why we are using group work in our classes." But I can't say that because I know for a fact that it isn't true. We all come to the use of collaborative strategies by different routes, and I would guess that most of us have practiced collaboration before we knew any theories. Kenneth Bruffee mentions a college teacher re-inventing collaborative learning and a class which, by trial and error, he turned into a collaborative class ("Collaborative Learning :Some Practical Models," College English 34[February, 1973]; 634-643). Charles Guilford's 1985 Penn State presentation began, "I couldn't face lecturing on the Romantic Period one more time, so I walked into my class and asked them to tell me what they knew about the Romantic Period." In my own return to teaching five years ago while trying to stay one step ahead of my students, I tried my first collaborative writing project. Success led to the investigation of the theories behind the success and the discovery of Gebhardt's article.

None of our personal libraries on the topic of collaboration and group work will be the same either although we may have some common entries. For example, in trying to get Clark Bouton and Russell Garth's Learning in Groups (Jossey-Bass, 1983) recommended in a workshop by Andrea Lunsford, I was sent David Jaques' Learning in

Groups (Croom Helm, 1984) which I consider one of my more valuable sources. Furthermore, it is difficult to reference suggestions from colleagues or notes on workshops and conferences we've attended that have helped shape our theories. Guilford's frustration with lecturing on the Romantic Period led to a system of formulating good questions which I have adapted for my classes.

Basically, though, I think we can agree on a few fundamentals which differ somewhat from Gebhardt's; however, if we could read his feedback as interaction, we might be closer. We are placing our students in various-sized groups from pairs to larger seminar groups, and we are turning over the responsibility for learning to the students. Bruffee would say that we are not "abrogating" our responsility; we're "redefining it" ("The Way Out," College English 33[January, 1972]: 469). In an essay from Bouton and Garth's book called, "Teachers and Learning Groups: The Dissolution of the Atlas Complex" by David Finkel and Stephen Monk, we see how teachers have in the past viewed themselves as the sole energy in the classroom and haven't made use of student to student interaction. "Like Atlas, such teachers support the entire enterprise" (86). Since the teachers have all the answers, why should the students look anywhere else? The students in this system are passive receivers, easy sleepers.

In studying the way students learn, David Jaques points out that many of the intrinsic aims of higher education, such as "developing imaginative and creative thinking, developing a critical and informed mind, and developing a social conscience,...are processes which are experienced mostly if not totally within well-organized discussion

groups" (64). "...the end is also the means." (63). Surprisingly, this same concept surfaced in more than one presentation at 1988's CCCC; the main value of using collaborative techniques may be in the process of collaborating itself, not the product of the collaboration.

The students have given us some resistance when we try to shift the weight of the classroom off our shoulders. Many of the easy sleepers do not want to wake up and take the responsibility for their own learning. Beverly Aronowitz and Harvey Wiener's "Comment and Response" speaks to this issue (College English 49[November, 1987]: 831-834). There is also controversy on how much we want to give our classes over to collaborative techniques realizing that the amount of material covered may be reduced although the depth of understanding increases. (Clark Bouton and Beryl Rice in Learning in Groups have shown this assumption might be faulty; they could "cover as much of the content as they would in traditional classes" 39.)

One colleague who has read earlier drafts of this article challenged, "If you believe in collaborative learning, why don't you walk into your first class of the semester and ask the students what they want to know about composition? Why are you just plugging collaboration in at various stages of the process?" I blanched because I knew there were still elements of my composition sequence that were being presented in a more traditional way. Could the students really "discover" the five-paragraph essay form collaboratively? However, to answer my colleague theoretically, I believe that within the process framework, the students should be exposed to as many strategies, stylistic skills, and types of

assignments as possible, even toward the end of the semester the five-paragraph essay form. Maxine Hairston's article would support this philosophy; collaborative learning is one of the successful strategies we use, but not the only one ("Different Products, Different Processes:A Theory about Writing," College Composition and Communication 37[December, 1986]: 442-452).

But how and where are we plugging collaborative learning in to our teaching of the writing process? My categories were taken from our department's syllabus but are not universally used; Donald Murray has only three: prewriting, writing, and rewriting ("Teach Writing as a Process not Product,"in Rhetoric and Composition, Richard Graves,ed., Boynton/Cook, 1984). To me the most interesting feature of Murray's categories is the amount of time he assigns to each although he did chuckle when I asked him how accurate they were: Prewriting 85%, Writing 1% and Rewriting 14%. Now, we all know, for the majority of our students, the act of writing takes as much as 85% of their time. I think we might consider ourselves successes as teachers of writing if we could get the percentage of time spent at this stage as low as 30%....50%? If we could get our students to verbalize concepts before they write, the quality of the writing would improve.

Our department's terms could be defined as Prewriting/Invention: expanding of ideas; Focusing/Thesis: looking for a form or pattern in the ideas; Writing: putting together the first draft; Revision: re-seeing and re-thinking content and structure; Editing: giving attention to the form of sentences, paragraphs and word choice; and

Proofreading: checking the final copy for misspellings and typographical errors. I certainly see separate steps here although I grant you they are overlapping, and I know that much of the revision and editing are going on as the students write.

Nevertheless, I needed some framework for discovering and discussing how we were using collaborative learning; these categories will serve-without too much confusion, I hope. As you can see, I can answer Gebhart that many of us are using collaborative strategies at many stages of the process. This survey is not a representative measure of percentage of faculty using collaboration; it only speaks for the ways we are using it.

USE OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING BY TEACHERS OF COMPOSITION

| | UNIVERSITY | SECONDARY |
|---|---|---|
| THOSE USING COLLABORATIVE WORK: | 43 | 28 |
| STAGES USED: | | |
| Prewriting/Invention | 81% | 68% |
| Focusing/Thesis | 58% | 54% |
| Writing | 49% | 54% |
| Revision | 77% | 89% |
| Editing | 58% | 86% |
| Proofreading | 65% | 75% |
| METHODS OF GROUPING: | | |
| Students group themselves | 33% | 14% |
| Teachers group students | 28% | 39% |
| Both | 40% | 46% |

Groups surveyed were Western Illinois University composition faculty(1986) and members of workshops at S.I.U.E., W.I.U., and the Wyoming Conference on English (1987).

The greatest percentage of university faculty are using collaborative learning at the prewriting stage. 81% brainstormed or did cubing for ideas, discussed essays, learned questioning skills, got a sense of audience, did research, and presented other invention

strategies in groups. The secondary teachers were the biggest surprise. 68% were using collaborative learning at the prewriting stage; ten of the teachers were using collaborative learning at every stage of the process. As a footnote to the table, at my session in Wyoming, there were two elementary teachers. One did not use collaborative strategies to teach composition; the other used them at every stage in the process.

Most of the prewriting activities mentioned, especially learning to ask the right questions, also help the students focus their topic. 58% of university faculty and 54% of high school teachers surveyed are using collaborative work to narrow the topic and formulate a thesis. The students can set up classification systems, work out comparisons, and test each other's theories and thesis statements in groups.

Criteria for definition is listed as one effective example of the inquiry method in George Hillocks Research on Written Composition (NCTE, 1896). Hillocks ranks the effectiveness of types of instruction on how well they improve the quality of writing. They range from a formal study of grammar which has a negative effect on the quality to the most effective: Focused Inquiry Techniques. One example of inquiry techniques which you can find in Hillocks works for a definition of courage by giving groups of students examples of courageous acts (184-5). Hillocks would argue that students learn strategies for dealing with sets of data that they can use in their writing and apply to other sets of data. The implications of his research are that we should be designing more structured collaborative tasks at the earlier stages of the process.

My survey shows only 49% of university faculty and 54% of high school faculty using collaborative strategies are having students write in groups. Although I find the advantages outweigh the problems, I can understand why my colleagues are leery of group writing. At the invention or revision and editing stages, most collaborative work is completed in the course of one class period. If a group is given a writing assignment which carries over several days, absenteeism can become a major difficulty as well as other problems of group dynamics such as dysfunctional groups, slackers within the groups, dictators, and personality conflicts. Yet this learning experience is valuable and, as Lunsford and Ede have shown, will be repeated on the job.

Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede have been studying the ways collaboration is being used in six professional organizations ("Why Write Together: A Research Update," Rhetoric Review 5[Fall, 1986]: 71-81). Two memorable numbers from their study are that almost 50% of the workers' professional time is spent in some type of writing activity and 87% are writing sometimes as part of a group. The workers most often collaborated "on the mental and procedural activities which precede and co-occur with the act of writing, as well as [on] the [actual] construction of the text"(73). This research supports the high percentage of university faculty who are designing collaborative tasks at the prewriting stage.

Lunsford and Ede have found seven patterns in the ways these projects were organized; three were listed in the article. Those of us who have assigned collaborative writing projects have probably

adhered scrupulously to Plan A: "Team or group plans and outlines. Each member drafts a part. Team or group compiles the parts and revises the whole" (74). Perhaps we should be trying other forms also such as Plan C: "One member assigns writing tasks. Each member carries out individual tasks. One member compiles the parts and revises the whole" (74).

Even before I read Hillocks' analysis showing that there was some question whether student revision and peer or teacher feedback improved the quality of student writing, I was receiving comments from both teachers and students that indicated that students were doing a poor job of peer evaluation and editing. This had led students to distrust peer comments and rely more heavily on teacher feedback. We were still fighting with the Atlas Complex. Others felt that collaborative work at the revision stage was most helpful, and it was used by 77% of university teachers and 89% of secondary teachers surveyed. Peer revision and editing have been the main focus of articles on collaboration; the National Writing Project has trained teachers to make use of this teaching technique. The students do need to be taught what to look for both in each other's papers and in their own; a good task description helps at this stage of the process as well as at prewriting.

Editing and proofreading skills can be taught very well in group situations. Sentence combining in groups is an effective way for the students to realize that editing is really playing with different combinations of words until they find the most effective. My survey indicates that the high school teachers are making greater use of

collaborative strategies at the editing (86%) and proofreading (75%) stages than the university faculty (58% and 65% respectively).

One further category that was not mentioned in my survey was written in by two different teachers who have their students actually grade each other's papers. One included an elaborate system which he uses after teaching the criteria for effective writing; the papers are circulated among groups, each group evaluating the papers for separate skills such as development, editing skills, use of figurative language, etc., and then a composite score determines the grade. Bruffee mentions grading as "the last bastion of traditional teaching" and urges faculty to help students learn "to evaluate meaningfully and intelligently" ("Way Out" 468).

The other point I covered on my informal survey was how the teacher splits the class into groups. I was looking for a foolproof system and, of course, found that none exists. Most comments have agreed that a heterogeneous grouping is best. Bruffee says four to six; Lunsford prefers the odd numbers three, five or seven. Again you'll notice a large difference between the high school teachers who prefer more control over the grouping and the university teachers. One colleague said, "I believe that random choice better prepares the students for the breaks in real life!" A variety of assignments would suggest a variety of grouping patterns; less control is needed over short daily projects, more control for longer ones. Pairs work well for introductions or a collaborative research paper, three for in-class revision workshops or researching a topic, larger groups for discussions, snowballing or pyramiding for exploration of a topic.

Many comments have appeared in the literature and on my surveys about the role of the teacher when doing collaborative work. The most specific and helpful for me were Thom Hawkins'in Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (ERIC/NCTE, 1976) and Harvey Wiener's in "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation" (College English 48[January, 1986]: 52-61). My colleagues range from reactions such as, "The teacher must be moving constantly from group to group..." to very conscientiously sitting outside the door as a resource so as not to influence the groups' decisions. There's probably a happy medium, but at some point the teacher has to step away in order for the students to develop confidence in their own judgments.

This stance of the teacher is extremely important, and most of us have found the right balance. If the students can respect our knowledge of the subject, trust us to know the most effective ways of transferring that knowledge or skill, and feel our concern for individual problems and successes, we are free to restructure the classroom in a variety of ways. If we take the terms from Peter Elbow's article, republished in his book, collaborative learning allows the students to see us more as coaches than gatekeepers (Embracing Contraries, Oxford U P, 1986).

As the results of my survey indicate, teachers of composition, perhaps with Gebhardt's article as inspiration, are designing collaborative tasks which help de-isolate students at all stages of the writing process. Yet, based on the theories of learning which underlie collaborative work, we should be designing even more. Those

desks, the outward sign of our shift in teaching philosophy, may never be in rows again!

ABSTRACT

Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Composition: Theory and Practice

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The common perception of collaboration in composition classes is that it's being used primarily with finished products: students working in peer discussion groups with completed drafts of other students' essays. This survey of colleagues and participants in workshops shows that college and secondary teachers of composition are using collaborative learning at all stages of the writing process, although some stages more than others. The paper begins with a discussion of the theories of collaboration and maintains that not all teachers have the same source base nor theoretical background before employing collaborative teaching strategies. Particular attention is paid to the recent research in collaborative writing and the implications of this research on the teaching of composition. The survey results show that for teachers using collaborative learning 1)collaboration is being used at prewriting most by college teachers (81%) and revision most by secondary teachers (89%), 2)the lowest percentage of both groups is using collaboration at the writing or drafting stage (49% college and 54% secondary), 3)a higher number of the secondary teachers are using collaboration at more stages of the process, and 4)secondary teachers exert more control over the grouping of the students. (Table and related readings are given in-text.)